DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 349 308 SP 034 055

AUTHOR Dana, Nancy Fichtman; And Others
TITLE Qualitative Interviewing and the Art of Questioning: Promises, Possibilities, Problems, and Pitfalls.
PUB DATE Jan 92
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Qualitative Research in Education Conference (Athens, GA, January 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; *Improvement; *Interviews; Personal Narratives; *Qualitative Research; *Questioning Techniques; Researchers; *Research Skills; Skill Development
IDENTIFIERS *Question and Answer Exercises; *Question Types

ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes practical strategies that qualitative researchers can employ to improve their interviewing skills. The first section, "The Art of Questioning: Wording Makes a Difference," presents several guidelines: (1) questions should be short and precise; (2) ask only one question at a time; (3) avoid questions in which the answer is either given or implied; (4) be cognizant of interviewees' use of language (i.e., dialects, idioms, jargon, slang) and use language that is understandable and comfortable for your informants; and (5) avoid "why" questions since they tend to put informants on the defensive. The next section, "Another Look at Questioning: It's Not Just the Wording. It May Be the Questions Themselves," outlines strategies which depart from the typical researcher question and facilitate verbal participation of the informant. Some question alternatives are: (1) the declarative statement; (2) the reflective statement; (3) the declaration of perplexity; (4) the invitation to elaborate; and (5) deliberate silence, also called wait time. Four constructed interviews illustrate the practical suggestions offered while simultaneously telling the stories of four researchers and their experiences with qualitative interviewing. (LL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED349308

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING AND THE ART OF QUESTIONING:

PROMISES, POSSIBILITIES, PROBLEMS, AND PITFALLS

Nancy Fichtman Dana
Thomas M. Dana
The Pennsylvania State University

Karla Lynn Kelsay
The Florida State University

Deborah Thomas
Georgia Southern University

Deborah J. Tippins
The University of Georgia

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

N. Dana

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Paper presented at the Qualitative Research in Education Conference, Athens, Georgia, January, 1992.

SP 034 055

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING AND THE ART OF QUESTIONING:

PROMISES, POSSIBILITIES, PROBLEMS, AND PITFALLS

Blessed are the skilled questioners, for they shall be given mountains of words to ascend.

Blessed are the wise questioners, for they shall unlock the hidden corridors of knowledge.

Blessed are the listening questioners, for they shall gain perspective. (Patton, 1990)

Qualitative interviewing is often considered a favorite methodological tool of qualitative researchers (Denzin, 1978). Although "the quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer" (Patton, 1990, p. 279), few methodological sources focusing on the skill of interviewing are available for novice and veteran qualitative researchers who seek to improve their interviewing skills. This paper draws on the limited qualitative interviewing methodological sources available (Patton, 1990; Seidman, 1991) as well as on literature on questioning and classroom discussion (Dana, 1988; Dillon, 1988; Swift & Gooding, 1983; Rowe, 1987) in order to create practical strategies qualitative researchers can employ to improve their interviewing skills. These practical strategies are followed by four constructed interviews between the authors of this paper. These interviews serve to illustrate the practical suggestions offered in the first part of this paper while simultaneously telling the stories of four researchers and their encounters with the promises, possibilities, problems, and pitfalls associated with qualitative interviewing.

The Art of Questioning: Wording Makes a Difference

Questioning has long been a subject of inquiry in educational settings. We have learned from the work of such researchers and theorists as Gall (1970), Payne (1951), Sanders (1966), and Wilen (1987) that questioning is indeed an art. The quality of the response a teacher receives from a student or a qualitative researcher receives from an informant is a

function of the careful composition of each question asked. Often, a slight variation in wording can inhibit a response to a question, rather than allow a teacher or researcher to access the perspective of the person being questioned (Patton, 1990). Therefore, based on the questioning research on classroom discussions as well as suggestions for qualitative interviewing made by Patton (1990), we suggest the following guidelines in wording questions that allow a respondent to make explicit his feelings, thoughts, opinions, or beliefs rather than express imposed responses predetermined by the qualitative researcher.

Guideline # 1. Questions should be short and precise. Avoid questions that contain embedded parenthetical phrases. The quality of an informant's answer is based on the assumption that the informant clearly understands the intent of the questions posed by the researcher. Questions that contain embedded parenthetical phrases [for example, "How do you view the relationship (by that I mean how people get along, what roles does each play etc.) between parents and the school?] may confuse the informant, thereby leading to responses that do not answer the question intended by the researcher, wasting valuable interview time.

Guideline # 2. Ask only one question at a time. After the researcher initially poses a question, the informant may require time to think. Uncomfortable with the silence, the researcher often rephrases a question, and in the rephrasing, actually asks a different question. Similar to lengthy questions containing parenthetical phrases, multiple questions may confuse the informant. Furthermore, multiple questions will not yield clear data as the researcher may not be able to discern what question is being answered.

Guideline # 3. Avoid questions in which the answer is either given or implied. The purpose of a qualitative interview "is not to put things in someone's mind (for example, the

interviewer's preconceived categories for organizing the world) but to access the perspective of the person being interviewed" (Patton, 1990, p. 278). Qualitative researchers must pay close attention that the wording of their questions does not impose their own preconceived thoughts on the interviewee. For example, by phrasing an interview question as "Isn't the quality of life more important than the quantity?," the researcher sends the implicit message to the informant that he or she values the quality of life above the quantity of life. The same question is better phrased as, "If you had to choose between quality of life or quantity, which would you choose?"

In addition, dichotomous questioning should be avoided. The purpose of an interview is to get the informant to talk as much as possible. Dichotomous questions imply that a simple "yes" or "no" answer is the only information requested by the researcher.

Guideline # 4. Be cognizant of interviewees use of language (i.e. dialects, idioms, jargon, slang). Use language that is understandable and comfortable for your informants. Clearly, in order for informants to answer a question, they must understand it. A period of time spent observing an informant may clue the researcher in on the informant's use of language. The researcher can then adjust the wording or phrasing of his or her questions so that wording and phrasing are appropriate to the informants' use of language.

Guideline # 5. Avoid why questions. Because why questions ask informants to justify previous responses, thoughts, or feelings, "why" questions can potentially be interpreted by informants as threatening. If threatened, informants may become defensive in their responses, affecting the data obtained. If carried to an extreme, the researcher risks alienating the informant and thereby looses a valuable source for data collection, analysis, and triangulation. "Why" questions such as "Why do you arrange student desks in rows?," can be

easily rephrased as "What are some reasons for the way you arranged your classroom?"

Another Look At Questioning: It's Not Just the Wording, It May Be The Questions Themselves.

Although the art of composing a question is important, there are actions a qualitative researcher can take during an interview that depart from the typical researcher question - informant answer format of most interviews. These strategies may further facilitate verbal participation of the informant without the risk of the researcher presupposing what dimensions of thought, feelings, or opinions are salient to informant. We believe that the use of question alternatives proposed by Dillon (1981) for classroom teachers' use during classroom discussions can be applied to qualitative research to enable an interviewer to better determine the dimensions, themes, images, or words people use to describe the events of their life. Rather than a question directed response, a person responding to a question alternative may select "from among that person's full repertoire of possible responses" (Patton, 1990, p. 296). The questions alternative proposed by Dillon are summarized and related to qualitative interviewing as follows:

Alternative # 1. The Declarative Statement. The qualitative researcher expresses his or her own state of mind, thought, or interpretation that occurred to the researcher in relation to what the informant has just said. When the researcher shares his/her interpretations of an informants' response, the informant has the option of accepting or rejecting the researcher's declaration, and may speak elaborately in acceptance or rejection of the researcher's statement or interpretation, rather than briefly answering a researcher's posed question. This alternative additionally allows the researcher to fulfill the researcher obligation of "turning his/ her thought back on itself," in order to "search out possible sources of blindness and bias in the

researcher's own ways of making sense of the reality being observed" (Schon, 1991, p. 357). When using this alternative, the researcher tests constructions in the interview by "bringing to the surface, juxtaposing, and discriminating among alternative accounts of that reality" (Schon, 1991, p. 357).

Alternative # 2. The Reflective Statement. The qualitative researcher summarizes his/her understanding of the informant's preceding statement, giving it an exact sense. This alternative indicates to the informant that the researcher is indeed attentive and appreciative of the contribution being made by the informant in a non-judgmental or threatening way. Thus, reflective statements may place informants at ease during the interview, helping the researcher to develop rapport and trust. When a researcher reflects rather than questions, the informant is encouraged to agree and continue with the thought that he/she feels to be valued, increasing the researcher's understanding of the informant's world.

Alternative # 3. The Declaration of Perplexity. The qualitative researcher clarifies his/her confusion or uncertainty of what the informant has said. This alternative is substituted for a researcher's question when the researcher is truly unclear of the informant's intent. A question at this point could be directed to a statement that was not said or meant by the informant, causing confusion or incorrect interpretation by the researcher. Declaration of perplexity can be formed by such statements as "I'm confused about what you're saying," or "I'm sorry, I'm not getting it." When a researcher declares perplexity, the informant is afforded the opportunity to clarify the statement and in so doing, clarify possible researcher interpretation.

Alternative # 4. The Invitation to Elaborate. The qualitative researcher indicates that he/she would like to hear more of the informant's views. This alternative is substituted for

the researcher's question to probe the informant's personal feelings and experiences. A question at this point often receives limited yes-no response. Invitation to elaborate can be stated simply by the interviewer as, "I'd like to hear more of your views on that." The invitation to elaborate encourages informants in a non-threatening manner as the message the informant receives is one of researcher care, concern, and genuine interest in finding out the informant's reasons for saying or thinking something.

Alternative # 5. Deliberate Silence, also called Wait Time. The qualitative researcher deliberately says nothing at all for 3 to 5 seconds after an informant comments. This alternative allows time for informant thought. When a researcher pauses with a silence rather than questions, the informant has time to complete a complex thought. When an informant is communicating a complex thought, they often pause, falter, or hesitate. These pauses are required for thinking, yet qualitative researchers often interrupt with "the next question," missing the opportunity for valuable data obtained when informants try to make sense of their experiences.

The following sections of this paper illustrate the alternatives to questioning techniques through constructed interview transcript between the authors of this papers. These constructed transcripts also serve to begin a dialogue about interviewing issues that move beyond the technical aspects of interviewing.

<u>On Interviewing From a Critical Theorist Perspective:</u>

<u>An Interview with Deborah Thomas</u>

Nancy: I understand you have a background working with early adolescent females who are potential drop outs.

Deborah: Yes, I was a middle school teacher working with at-risk students for several years. My dissertation study focused on developing an understanding of how rural female students identified as at-risk experience schooling from a critical theorist perspective.

Nancy: As a critical theorist, what insights do you have on the interviewing process?

Deborah: Critical theorists recognize that race, class and gender inequities are legitimated and reproduced in the school setting. A major goal of critical theorists is to implement changes which lead to student empowerment. I found from my early experiences that I tried to empower my students without first understanding their experiences and perspectives.

Nancy: I'm not sure I understand what you mean.[1]

Deborah: Let me share with you an example. One afternoon I was talking with a group of five or six 13 or 14 year old eighth grade girls. All of these girls were sexually active. They shared with me that they often felt boys forced or pressured them to engage in sex, and they did not know how to discourage boys' advances. So I thought, "Ah ha, this is my opportunity to empower these young girls." I began to ask them, or to encourage them to come up with ideas for dealing with this situation. They provided excellent ideas. I was feeling very smug thinking that I was helping them change their lives. Just as the bell rang for school to dismiss for the day, one of the young girls said to me, "Ms. Thomas, but what do I do when I'm desperate?" I remember feeling relieved that the bell had rung because I did know how to respond. Her question made me realize that I had used my own experiences as a basis for our discussion, rather than exploring their lives and experiences. I had not considered the sexual desires of these young girls, or recognize that a 13 or 14 year old girl may have sexual desires. Our discussion did not empower these girls. I did not give them an opportunity to share their experiences.

Nancy: What have you learned from this experience?

Deborah: Interviewing is a valuable tool in developing an understanding of the lives of our participants. It is imperative to use the experiences of the participants, rather than our own, as a basis for discussion. Developing an open, trusting relationship with our participants, and inviting them to share about their lives is empowering for both participant and researcher.

On Implementing the Group Interview:

An Interview with Thomas Dana

Nancy: I understand that you have been involved in a study working with a group of teachers in an elementary school.

Tom: There are eight of us in the group -- two university people and six elementary school teachers. Together we have been exploring the notion of teacher change and curriculum reform. We meet together weekly for two hours in the school media center.

---

[1]Declaration of Perplexity

Nancy: What have you learned about interviewing from your experience working with this group of teachers?

Tom: It's very different than working with one person. In the group setting, there are often several people speaking at one time. As the researcher, I've often been confronted with a difficult decision: "What do I ask next when I've heard so many different ideas?"

Nancy: What factors do you consider when deciding what to do next?

Tom: Well it's like striking a balance. I need to consider what these teachers want to get out of our session and what will forward my research agenda. I will often admit that I have heard a variety of ideas and ask them to isolate one or two that we can explore in more detail.

Nancy: Interesting. Tell me more about your experiences with group interviewing.[2]

Tom: Well, another thing is, when these teacher speak, it is often in the context of stories from their classrooms. These stories have been fascinating and are a rich source of data. However, there has been so much information embedded in these stories that they have been difficult for me to react to on the spot.

Nancy: It sounds as if implementing a group interview can become somewhat chaotic.[3]

Tom: It sure can, but it's certainly worth it. One advantage I have found, in the midst of all the chaos, is that one teacher will often build on another teacher's story, giving me insight into the collective meanings negotiated by this group of teachers as they explore school reform. I have learned that teachers are often storytellers and communicate their knowledge of teaching through narrative. At first this confused me as I was looking for short and sweet, direct answers to questions posed. What I have learned is that interviewers have to be good listeners, especially when you are interviewing a focus group. Furthermore, patience in the time consuming process of letting stories unfold is rewarded with rich data and illustrative vignettes.

On Ethical Considerations of Interviewing:

An Interview with Deborah Tippins

Nancy: I'm interested in the process of interviewing. What concerns do you have with the use of interviewing in qualitative research?

---

[2]Invitation to Elaborate

[3]Declarative Statement

Deborah: Well, the first problem that comes to mind is the ethical considerations in the interview process. In my work with teachers, I've encountered a variety of ethical dilemmas while interviewing.

Nancy: I'd like to hear a personal example of an ethical dilemma you've encountered in your research.[4]

Deborah: I can think of an example that happened recently when I was interviewing Greg, a middle school science teacher. Greg and I were collaboratively investigating his beliefs about science teaching and learning, and how these beliefs informed his practice. During this particular interview, we began exploring Greg's ideas about the nature of truth in relation to teaching science. As the interview progressed, it was apparent that Greg was becoming increasingly uncomfortable because the discussion of truth was creating dissonance in terms of his religious beliefs. As a researcher, I now faced an ethical dilemma: Should I continue to probe his beliefs about truth knowing that he was experiencing distress?

Nancy: It sounds as though **you** were feeling uncomfortable in your role as a researcher.[5]

Deborah: Actually, I wasn't feeling uncomfortable. I continued to ask even more thought provoking questions about truth in order to understand what Greg actually believed about truth.

Nancy: I hear you saying that it is ethical to cause an informant to feel distressed in the interest of the research data.[6]

Deborah: In a certain sense, yes, because my research is grounded in a particular set of beliefs consistent with an epistemology known as constructivism.

[3 second pause][7]

Deborah: Basically, that means that learning is viewed as a process of personally constructing or making sense of experiences in relation to prior knowledge. From a constructivist perspective, dissonance is desired in order for learning to occur. So I see the dissonance that Greg was experiencing as part of the learning process.

Nancy: So what is the moral of your story?

---

[4]Invitation to Elaborate

[5]Declarative Statement

[6]Reflective Statement

[7]Deliberate Silence

Deborah: Because ethical dilemmas are embedded in many aspects of qualitative research and often surface in the context of interviewing, I believe it's extremely important for research to be epistemologically rooted. That means the researcher needs to be aware of what they believe and how their beliefs are changing in the course of the research process.

On Teaching the Skills of Interviewing: An Interview with Karla Lynn Kelsay

Nancy: I understand that you have been teaching a course called "The Teacher As Researcher." There must be a number of skills these teachers need to successfully engage in the process of doing qualitative research.

Karla: The skills are important, but what I see as being an essential prerequisite is a mindset about what qualitative research is, and what doing that kind of research might look like.

Nancy: Tell me more about what you mean by a "mindset."[8]

Karla: Well, a mindset is a way of looking at things -- a way of seeing. When doing qualitative research, the researcher is always trying to fit together the big picture and its individual pieces. For me it's sort of like a puzzle.

Nancy: Interviewing is one essential skill in collecting rich qualitative data. How would you help create a mindset for the most effective use of interviewing in qualitative research?

Karla: I find it's best to start with existing notions about what interviewing is, and what its purposes might be. Most people have an idea about interviewing that involves the interviewer trying to elicit somewhat specific information -- maybe similar to an interrogation. We talk about that first, and then we move towards discussing more open kinds of questions.

Nancy: I'm confused about what you mean by "open kinds of questions."[9]

Karla: First, I think you have to go back to the driving force behind qualitative research. You want to find what meaning a person gives to something. You want to know why they give that something that certain meaning. So, your open questions invite your informants to let you know these things.

Nancy: This is still rather abstract. An example might help me to understand your point.[10]

Karla: Let's say a teacher researcher is interested in learning more about the self concepts her students hold about themselves. She certainly would not want to ask a direct question, such as, "How's your self concept?" (laughter) Instead, she will ask questions about things

---

[8]Invitation to Elaborate

[9]Declaration of Perplexity

[10]Declaration of Perplexity, Invitation to Elaborate

that might paint a picture of a child's self concept. She might set up a scenario and invite a child to talk about his or her feelings or opinions. She might ask questions such as, "What do you think is really going on in this story?" and "How would you feel in this situation?"

Nancy: So I hear you saying that asking open ended questions is extremely important for successful interviewing.[11]

Karla: Yes. The ultimate goal is to have rich data, full of the informant's meanings. Open ended questions are the invitation for the informant to respond with the most revelation.

Conclusions and Implication

According to Patton (1990), the best approach to qualitative interviewing is "to believe that there is a way to unlock the internal perspectives of every interviewee" (p. 358). Gaining insights into these perspectives is the responsibility of the interviewer. In this paper, we have summarized specific technical skills that may provide the key for the interviewer to unlock the internal perspectives of their informants. Yet, when that door is opened, a range of other issues may surface. For example, issues about interviewing that surfaced when qualitative interviewers were "interviewed" in this paper include empowerment of informants, the value of story and narrative in research, ethical considerations of interviewing and finally, the importance of creating a mindset for engaging in the process of qualitative inquiry and the interview process. In our constructed dialogues with one another regarding these issues, we have not only learned from articulating our own experiences with qualitative interviewing, but we have learned from the experiences of others. Our dialogues are an attempt to begin a conversation between qualitative researchers on the particular approaches to their work. Our hope is that other qualitative researchers will enter into these conversations as they encounter the promises, possibilities, problems, and pitfalls of qualitative interviewing and qualitative inquiry.

---

[11]Reflective Statement

References

Dana, N. (1988). The effects of questioning and alternatives to questioning on student verbal participation in elementary classroom discussions. Unpublished master's thesis, State University of New York at Oswego, Oswego, NY.

Denzin, N. (1978). The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods. Chicago: Aldine.

Dillon, J. T. (1983). Teaching and the art of questioning. (Fastback Monograph No. 194). Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.

Dillon, J. T. (1988). Questioning and discussion: A multidisciplinary study. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Gall, M. D. (1970). The use of questions in teaching. Review of Educational Research, 40, 707-721.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). Qualitative evaluation and research methods. Newbury Park, California: SAGE Publications.

Payne, S. L. (1951). The art of asking questions. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rowe, M. B. (1987). Wait time: Slowing down may be a way of speeding up. American Educator, 38 - 47.

Sanders, N. M. (1966). Classroom questions: What kinds? New York: Harper & Rowe.

Schön, D. A. (Ed.). (1991). The reflective turn: Case studies in and on educational practice. New York: Teachers College Press.

Seidman, I. E. (1991). Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences. New York: Teachers College Press.

Swift, J. N. & Gooding. C. T. (1983). Discussion facilitation guides. (Classroom Interaction Research Laboratory). New York: State University College at Oswego.

Wilen, W. W. (Ed.) (1987). Questions, questioning techniques, and effective teaching. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association.